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ECONOMY OF POWER.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SABBATH SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

OF THE

Canada Presbyterian Church,

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BY THE

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I do not know that ever in my whole life I have addressed a meeting where I was more anxious to say something useful, and to the point; something that would be at once memorable and practical, capable of being and likely to be carried out; and which, when carried out, would further the great end we have in view.

I have been accustomed to look upon our Sabbath School system pretty much as our practical scientific men have begun to look upon the steam-engine. The results are wonderful, amazing, god-like, but nothing at all to what they might have been.

It has been demonstrated that however magnificent the results achieved, no steam-engine, as yet made, uses more than a very small fraction of the available lifting power contained in the fuel consumed. Imperfection in the means of combustion, in the economy and application of the heat, unnecessary friction and ill-directed force dissipates the rest.

In like manner, we cannot speak disparagingly of the results of Sabbath School instruction; one of the most honoured instruments of the great revival of the nineteenth century; one, and confessedly not the least influential of those divine forces which have so effectually rolled back the

deluge of infidelity and godlessness which threatened to engulf, and in fact, in great measure, had engulfed the homes and hearts of our people. If we have seen religion gaining ground step by step; if we have seen the extinguished flames of the domestic altar rekindled; if we have seen the neglected house of God revisited; if we have seen rapidly multiplying churches crowded as fast as built; if we have seen the pulpit glowing with a warmer, heartier utterance of Divine truth, and the pew so much more seldom occupied by drowsy listeners; if, finally, we have seen revivals and awakenings demonstrating themselves to the conviction of the most incredulous, and all christendom, open-eyed and expectant, regarding all that has been received as only the precursor drops of a great and fertilizing shower; we owe it under God not a little to those tiny seeds scattered so profusely in the virgin soil of young and tender hearts.

And yet, while all this is true, is it possible to overlook the fact that in the Sabbath School institution there is an amazing amount of undeveloped, or unapplied, or misdirected force, which if brought out and made available, if economically and judiciously employed, would make the future of the institution dwarf the past as much as the inventions of Watt did those of Newcomen, or as the still greater inventions yet in store are expected to dwarf even the glorious present.

And first, is there not a great waste of efficiency arising from irregularity in teachers and scholars?

The loss of a single Sabbath is no slight matter when we have only Sabbaths to work with. But this gives no adequate representation of the evil. The influence of the

teacher, and the interest of the pupil are alike weakened ; the sympathy between them is interrupted, and future Sabbaths feel the consequence in inanimate teaching and listless learning, and feel it in a ratio increasing in geometrical proportion with the increase of irregularity.

Teacher ! on that day when you were absent, perhaps there was a scholar in his place with glistening eye, looking for sympathy which a stranger could not give, and longing for words of approval, priceless from you, worthless from any other. Pricked to the heart by words of loving rebuke, he had striven to overcome his careless habits, and hoped that you would take the well conned lesson as a pledge of better things ; hoped to read in your eyes encouragement and help for future struggles. The heart was tender then in the consciousness of that victory which was itself the confession and rebuke of past neglect. What was it afterwards, when disappointed, heart-sick, and discouraged, he ceased to calculate on your approval as the certain reward of well-meant effort ?

Or, if there were no such peculiar case, have you ever after such absence found the verses or the catechism of the day as fully or as well recited by your scholars, or yourself as able to enter heartily into the business of your class ? Was there not a lesson then taught which ought never to have been learned in a Sabbath School ? It is a cruel thing when a class of young immortals is entrusted to the care of one remiss in his attendance ; and no feeling of delicacy towards delinquent teachers should induce a conscientious superintendent to allow such a state of matters to continue.

The irregularity of scholars is an evil only less than that of teachers, but it is one more easily remedied. Indeed, when we remember that the vast majority of Sabbath scholars come of their own accord, come because they themselves wish to come ; and when we observe how little reason a punctual teacher has in general to complain of an irregular class, it is manifest that the cure of the one evil is practically, at least to a great extent, the cure of the other also. Visitation of the scholars and kindly enquiry into the reasons of absence would still farther check the one ; for the other there is perhaps no effectual cure but a resolute excision of the faulty member. Yet it might tend to remedy much of it, if the attendance of teachers were as regularly marked as that of scholars, and if the results were regularly read over from month to month at the meeting which ought always to be held to consider the state of the school. It would be a great point gained if teachers were made aware of the cumulative results of those occasional absences which seem individually so trivial a matter.

2. But again, is there not often a miserable waste of efficiency arising from the low temperature of our own hearts ?

Let me borrow an illustration from another branch of mechanical art. Some of you may be aware of the amazing impetus which was given to the iron manufacture by the invention of the hot blast. Previously a blast of cold air was used to increase the rapidity of combustion and intensify the heat by which the obdurate ore was fused and compelled to part with its dross that the pure metal might come forth. At length the happy thought occurred to a working man (it is only to working men that such thoughts occur) of

substituting a blast of warm air, of first heating the air itself before it was employed to increase the temperature of the burning mass. The effect was astounding; immensely shortening the process, and by economy of time, labour, and fuel, cheapening the production. Large fortunes have been gained in consequence, and, what is of more importance, the immensely increased demands of our age have been met with a promptitude otherwise impossible, and a rapidity without which many of our social improvements would have been greatly retarded.

Ah, dear christian friends, let us learn a lesson from the hot blast. A little time spent in our closets in bringing our hearts to a glow, would be an unspeakable economy of time spent with our class. And if each Sabbath School had its weekly Teachers' Prayer Meeting fully attended; and if at such meeting one or more carefully selected portions of the Word of God were read, passages more particularly speaking of the fullness of mercy, of the fullness of grace, of the love of Jesus, of the love of the Spirit, of the love of the Father, of the abounding privileges of the believer, and the weight of obligation rendered light by love which rests on the shoulders of the redeemed; and if after each passage read, one or more would in brief and earnest prayer endeavour to express for all the faith, and hope, and love, due from each; and if all would strive believingly, and if possible, rejoicingly to enter fully into that communion which is with the Father and with his Son, Christ Jesus; do you not suppose that we would speedily see a revolution greater than that which the hot blast wrought in the great staple of British manufacture?

3. Is there not a great waste from want of suitable implements?

Two implements indeed you have, the one the best possible, and the other, I do firmly believe, the very best of its kind. In the Bible you have God's word, the chosen weapon of the Spirit: perfect, complete, and gloriously adapted to its end. And the Catechism is the production of such an assembly of devout and well instructed men as I believe has seldom been convened, and is such a compend of vital truth as has seldom been equalled, never surpassed by uninspired men.

But when I speak of suitable implements, I mean Bible helps, and helps in teaching the Catechism. Now, how many teachers are supplied with even a good Concordance, a Bible Text-book and Treasury, a Bible Dictionary, not to speak of a good illustrative Commentary? How many teachers are supplied with any of those numerous and excellent helps in teaching the Catechism by which the difficulty arising from its very compendiousness is obviated or overcome, and what is apt to seem dry and abstract made interesting and practical. Friends, when I think of the superior efficiency which the use of existing helps of this kind would give to Sabbath School instruction, I feel like saying with Christ, "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one."

4. Is there not great waste from want of suitable methods?

One teacher asks questions which the scholar can answer with a yes, or a no, without understanding, perhaps without even hearing the question distinctly; "This is so and so, is'nt it?" "We should do so and so, shouldn't we?"

Another uses words which the scholars cannot understand, and gets no answer, or an answer so ludicrous as to provoke a laugh. Another lectures when he should be questioning, and the listless little ones are letting their minds and eyes wander at will. Another confines himself for a time to one and the others cannot hear, and are not led to suppose that they have any interest in listening. Another contents himself with simply hearing the prescribed lesson repeated by rote, and so gets speedily through, and his class are unoccupied for a considerable time while the others are still engaged, and Satan finds what the teacher cannot find, something to occupy the idle but inevitably busy little ones. And all this in the hands of teachers who could do better, and would, oh, how heartily and gladly they would, if they only knew how.

Now this is a matter that might be easily and speedily remedied. Let a few minutes at the close of the weekly prayer meeting be devoted to the study of the ensuing lesson. Let the superintendent or the chairman of the meeting read a verse, or more if the sense requires it. Let him call upon some one to mention the question which he would first put on such a verse. Let the others object, if as it seems to them, some other question had better lead the way, or the phraseology might be altered so as to make it more suitable to the capacity of the children. When the order and wording of the questions are thus satisfactorily settled, let each teacher take a note of them, and if necessary of the correct answer. Let the lesson be thus gone through, verse by verse. Let the doctrinal and practical lessons deducible from the passage be pointed out in the same way, every one endeavouring to contribute his quota,

and thus each teacher, even the least apt to teach, would be qualified to appear before his class thoroughly prepared to make the most of the day's work, and with the least possible waste of time.

5. Is there not frequently a great waste of efficiency arising from ignorance, or neglect of what lies ready to our hands in the minds and hearts of the children ?

I have borrowed one illustration from the iron manufacture, let me borrow another. The usual method of manufacturing wrought iron from the cast metal is tedious, laborious, and expensive. It has to be kept long at a great heat, it has to be puddled, and beaten, and wrought with, before it changes its character from the extremely hard and brittle substance which first comes from the furnace, to the tenacious and malleable metal that can be wrought in the forge. Now it occurred some time ago to a Mr. Bessemer, that the carbon of the hard cast iron, the very cause of the hardness, might itself be made the fuel to produce the heat required, and that in burning out the carbon, the hardness would be at the same time removed. Accordingly, he arranged to receive the hot and gleaming mass as it came from the furnace into a suitable receptacle, so that he could force up through it a current of atmospheric air. This was no sooner done than, just as he expected, he found that the charcoal of the iron thus supplied with air would burn, at once keeping up the heat, and itself passing off in gas. And so, in an incredibly short time and at comparatively no expense, he produced what could not otherwise have been obtained without a vastly greater expenditure of money, time, and labour.

Now fellow teachers, in the minds and hearts of your

pupils there lie just such materials available for equally great results ; thoughts, feelings, fancies, passions, emotions, convictions ; which, while they are like the carbon in the iron, the very cause of that obduracy which so puzzles and perplexes you, so tries your patience and defeats your efforts, might become, as the Spirit of the Lord blows upon them, the means of their own consumption, and the hearts speedy softening ; if only for this end we knew what they were and how to take advantage of them.

But alas ! how many of us know anything about our pupils more than we can learn from the brief hour they sit before us ? How many of us even all that might be learned from that ? How few of us are trying to learn all that may be known about our pupils by talking with them elsewhere and apart from sabbath school business, by hearing what their companions have to say of them, or their parents, friends, and acquaintances ; or by even watching the indications of the inner life which the class-hour gives ! How much fewer, perhaps, are pondering and praying that we may discover how the facts so learned may be turned to good.

6. Is there not a great waste of efficiency in our too often putting the last thing first, and seeking our scholars' instruction, that they may be converted, instead of their conversion, that they may be instructed ?

It is a hard thing teaching the Scripture to an unawakened soul, but an easy and delightful task when the Spirit of God is shining upon the heart. How many are there of us who believe that children, even very young children, cannot become the subjects of converting grace ? I should hope not many ; might I not venture to believe not any. But how

many of us are looking, and longing, and praying, and directing our efforts first and mainly to their immediate conversion. No teacher in a Sabbath School has so many pupils as that each of them might not separately be borne on the mind before a throne of grace, and separately watched for those signs of a saving change which surely might be expected to follow believing prayer, and humble God relying effort. Dear friends, need I argue with any of you how much faster a saving knowledge of Divine things, how much more facilely a thorough scriptural understanding can be obtained by that individual, be it child or man, who has been brought by conviction of sin, and simple reliance on a crucified Redeemer, to lie low at the feet of Jesus.

And oh ! what unspeakable interest it would give to our work to know that as far as men could judge, the seeds we were privileged to sow would blossom in the Paradise of our God, and the plants we were watering would grow up in our God's house for ever.

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